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AUTHOR Reilly, John M.
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ABSTRACT

Through an analysis of several stories, this paper defines the similarities and differences between classic and hard-boiled detective fiction. The characters and plots of three stories are discussed: "The Red House" by A. A. Milne; "I, The Jury" by Mickey Spillane; and "League of Frightened Men" by Rex Stout. The classic detective story is defined as one in which there is a strong authorial presence and a great distance between the reader and the criminal realities of life. The hard-boiled detective story is defined as a story in which there is less authorial presence and the characters themselves are more fully developed. This paper concludes that although there are differences among detective stories, many of these differences occur largely in the author's choice of milieu and stress in characterization. (TS)

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John M. Reilly
English Dept.
SUNYA
Albany, NY 12222

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Classic and Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction

From its inception criticism of detective literature has been insistent upon developing a formal taxonomy. As a result we are used to distinguishing, following the lead of Dorothy Sayers, among stories of pure sensation, pure analysis, and a variety of mixed types subdivided according to the presence of detectives who are scientific or intuitive, amateur or professional.[1] And, if Sayers is not sufficiently comprehensive to cover all developments, we can observe that tales of police procedure, thrillers, and pure detective stories exhibit differences also. Such typing of detective fiction, ~~however,~~ makes at best an elementary contribution to understanding, however, serving as it does mainly to legitimate popular literature by indicating that it is more complex than it appears. Much more useful, though still taxonomic, is the critical discussion that has established the more general distinction between detective literature of the so-called Golden Age and that called Hard-Boiled.

We are all familiar with the distinction. In the classic form of the Golden Age, flourishing between the end of World War I and the 1930's but nevertheless begun earlier and continuing to the present, authors deploy their eccentric amateur detectives to solve puzzles created by murderers' ingenious attempts to conceal the outcome of their comparatively simple desires for wealth or revenge in commission of a perfect crime. The process of detection supplies plot, curious traits constitute characterization, and restoration of order is the theme of the narrative. On the other hand, Hard-Boiled detective stories are touted as realistic portrayals of criminal life. In these stories the detective is in many ways as low as the criminal, and the solution of the crime achieves at best a tentative sense of order.

I say the critical distinction between the classic detective fiction of the Golden Age and the Hard-Boiled variety is useful, not because it is absolute

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but rather because it is provocative. One type appears to be the literary manifestation of a conservative point of view, the other a more liberal one; yet,a study of the two types reveals no such easy contrast, and one is challenged to explain a fundamental similarity in such apparently disparate forms. As a consequence we come to see the detective story is both a predetermined framework and a terrain for authors to deploy varieties of social outlook.

We may begin to explain this point by examining A.A. Milne's The Red House Mystery (1922), a work of double significance since it appears in most lists of important classic detective works and also was chosen by Raymond Chandler for particular scorn in his denunciation of the "unrealistic" Golden Age type of story.[2]

As the novel opens, the Red House provides the setting for a manners tale. Its inviting appearance, quiet atmosphere, and function as the home of a well-to-do gentleman mark it as the residence of an idealized British upper class. The various house guests, going about their play, and the servants engaging in comic dialogue enforce the sense we have that here is a social microcosm neatly structured and ideally set. Milne obtrusively manages the narrative, giving us brief snatches of conversation to establish the central fact of the plot's initiation: the imminent arrival of Mark Ablett's black sheep brother from Australia. The author's obtrusiveness also provides a brief flash back, after the sound of the fatal shot is heard from the study, in order to show house guests at breakfast. Indeed, as befits a stage writer, whenever we need detail Milne steps in with physical description, for example of the study and then of Anthony Gillingham, an uninvited guest soon to become the novel's amateur detective, though his background, which Milne also describes for us, shows him to be without technical preparation for the job.

The obtrusive author functions to shape the narrative almost as a Dr. Watson figure would in other novels and stories, but in this book there is also

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a mock Watson in the person of Bill Beverly, one of the house guests who is acquainted with Gillingham. As soon as the game is afoot, Gillingham and Beverly begin jocularly to refer to each other as Holmes and Watson and describe their detection method with good-natured allusion to the famous pair, a device always reminding us, of course, that this is a fiction we are reading.

As for the detection method itself, Milne elaborately describes it as the outcome of Gillingham's remarkable memory. With a demonstration by Gillingham of his recollection of the precise number of steps at the entry to his London club we are given the substantial basis of the amateur's method, and then in frequent scenes such as reconstruction of the moment of the crime's discovery, patient turning over of alternative explanations, and reflection on the relationships of the house's owner and his secretary, a cousin, we are provided assurance that the detection method is available to the unaided rational mind but also the possession of a superior person since Gillingham alone has the peculiar memory and disciplined process to carry it to fruition.

Naturally the police are present doing their job after the discovery of the dead body, but, as Chandler makes clear, they go about it with dullness and lack of imagination. Chandler's knowledge of police procedure shakes our faith, jars us into recognition of the Milne police as incompetents, but within the novel, managed as they are by the author, the police serve merely as friendly colleagues. Perhaps there is potential rivalry between amateur and professional, but it is in no way antagonistic. The amateur simply does the job better in achieving the end for which police exist; maintaince of social order for the benefit of those with a stake in society.

While other chracteristics of the novel may represent further the Golden Age classic story, what has been mentioned is sufficient to make the point that the craft of the story is bent to achieve, first, certainty that the world is under control, a consequence of the strong authorial presence. Secondly, the author's craft creates a distance from the criminal realities we may know from popular newspapers where sensation and irrationality are characteristics of

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crime. The distance is great enough to replace the nervousness one feels about the possibilities of order when reading the newspaper with a relaxed tolerance. The closed society, the obtrusive authorial presence, and the self-consciousness about method, accompanied in this case by jocular tone and reference to fictional detectives, make the story of crime, as the Golden Age preferred, very much a game. It is a game, though, that images a world, in this case a world constructed out of faith in reason, preference for simplicity, and confidence that leisured upper class existence in its patterns and habits represents civilization.

While the Milne novel serves as an extremely good example of the conservative detective story, it must be remembered that the idealization of detection has never been absent from mystery literature. The literary form we call detective story makes its appearance at the time detectives and official police forces do, but there has never been a point in the subsequent history of the form when those who took the detective for literary purposes did not stress the masterful mind and the surety of a class-based social order. Consider even those works allegedly based on the actual exploits of real detectives. Julian Hawthorne's novels about the famous Thomas Byrnes of New York portrays him as a mastermind directing from his office the procedures to protect the deserving from chaos, and though Alan Pinkerton's memoirs of detective work admit to use of informants and trickery, that is to say standard police practices, the overall impression Pinkerton wishes to give is of disinterested application of rational processes to maintaining social stability.[3]

These examples of tales based upon actual detective work suggest that from one perspective the detective story is a deliberate ideological creation. In this regard we can say that the ideology works by distancing readers from reality. The simplicity of motives for crime assures us the good old deadly sins predominate. The clarity of the detection procedure, always fulfilled when the culprit is uncovered, mystifies reality by its very simplicity, just as ideology mystifies

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by simplifying cause and effect. Furthermore, the autonomy of the detective novel's world desensitizes us to fear of the unknown. Whatever surprizes there may be are finally explained in a way that is completely tolerable. And finally, viewed as ideological creations, detective stories make alienation tolerable. Things may be out of our hands, individual power in historical life may be dubious, but there is a world, that of the novel, composed of values derived from our social ~~experience~~ beliefs where individualism fluorishes within, be it noted, a well-ordered and complete society. Seen under the aspect of ideology the famous rules of the game so dear to the Golden Age authors and critics are guidelines for designing a product to affect readers' consciousness of themselves in the world in the same way that on a somewhat baser level advertising stressing the desirability of a youthful appearance influences our habits of hygiene and dress.

From another perspective, however, this description of the ideological detective novel is too simple. All detective stories, after all, must be about the same thing, ~~ab~~ that in any fiction of crime solving there is a tendency to closure inherent in the narrative. Though ~~a~~ solution of the plot may result in but a brief restoration of order, return in the story to conditions as they were at the beginning constitutes an assertion of normative order. Furthermore, if an author uses a detective at all, inevitably there results a suggestion of at least limited individual force of mind or ability to reconstruct order.

These literary imperatives of a detective novel are modified but not transcended.[4] To be sure Philip Marlowe's self-conscious irony about detective work contributes to our finding a theme of meditation upon values in his adventures, and his satiric eye for sleazy details aptly represents a corrupt, commodity society; yet, it is only the degree to which Chandler carries all this that differs from other detective writing. Self-consciousness and awareness of detail are part of the form consistently whether Golden Age or Hard-Boiled. Chandler's achievement is great, for his craft introduces a significant portrayal of modern America into detective fiction. We make too much of his differences from other

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detective writers, however, if we do not observe that what he achieves is within the demands of formula.

The general principle I am arguing here may be better illustrated by reference to less great works than Chandler's; for example, a Nero Wolfe story. A work such as League of Frightened Men (1935) written at the time that Golden Age stories begin to yield their place to Hard-Boiled ones appears something of a hybrid of the types. The plot offers the material of a puzzle: how does a presumed villain effect the seeming accidents that are frightening a group of former college class mates? Wolfe's clients whose lives and careers have diverged so since they participated in the college prank that injured one of their number hardly constitute a closed society but they are its modified version - a micro-cosm of the college trained, middle class, population of the American northeast. Many are thoroughly unlikeable people, as is the falsely accused pseudo-villain, so when the story ends we have little confidence of a paradise regained. Still, order is restored and these typical figures are to go about their business freed of some of their guilt and fear.

Hybrid, too, is the tone of the story. Archie Goodwin, confidant and Watson to Wolfe's Holmes, talks tough, likes dames, is at odds with police authority, will use his fists and wink at the law. But it is mannerism. Archie is always at the service of his great detective, adjusting his evaluations of people and events to Wolfe's authority. Speaking of mannerisms, we note Wolfe is almost a parody of the eccentric whose constellation of personal traits engender the idea that his mind and abilities are unique. Reggie Fortune, Philo Vance, and Lord Peter Wimsey have been updated. Gourmet and orchidologist on a scale beyond the impractical, peculiar in dress and ritual in ways that are the stuff of popular magazine personality profiles, Wolfe is the traditional detective living the commodified life style while embracing the values retailed in popular images of the urban upper class.

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Wolfe's stories are hybrids yes, but not of incompatible types of story, for what Wolfe represents is adaptation of the basic detective story form to a new setting. In his case it is the big American city where the range of social certitude has been restricted. To allow his detective to function Rex Stout must ensconce him in a brownstone island of stable, ordered living and make him content with bringing order on a limited scale. The brownstone island images the classic detective under siege, perhaps, but it is in his nature to carry on.

Maybe Nero Wolfe is a set-up. So, then, let's think of the toughest of the tough, a detective who works among the lowest types society has to offer, who comes up against dope and prostitution as well as brutal murder - the crimes that are the daily fare of newspaper readers. How about Mike Hammer? Talking constantly about the "real" world and the way it works, unblinking in the face of violence and social incoherence, it would seem that by the time he appears in I, the Jury (1947) twenty-five years after Milne's tame little country house story the detective story had undergone considerable change. Of course it had, but whether the change has been fundamental enough to reconstitute the imperatives of the form is the question.

There is next to no detection method in a Hammer story, at least so far as that implies reasoning through clues and motives. Mike employs in exaggerated form the methods we are told the policeman dreams of, relentlessly hunting down the guilty, breaking and entering to gain evidence, terrorizing witnesses and others to get information, and, as the title of the first novel suggests, rendering justice immediately and infallibly. Other detectives have allowed themselves to become surrogate executioners (Reggie Fortune and Philo Vance for example), but it is Mike's mission to complete in himself the entire criminal justice system. The vigilante purpose is accompanied in Mike Hammer by unfaltering certainty

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in speech and attitude. None of the doubts of Marlowe for him. His hatred of evildoers who have offended his sense of honor as well as the continuously felt dislike of women and non-white people are deeply structured into his personality. Not only are his motives simple, so too are the motives of others in his world. Profit and self-protection are the usual ones for murder, and where a character such as the evil female psychiatrist Charlotte Manning is concerned the cause of her actions is deviance from the behavior Mike, and she herself, know is natural for women.

Surely these features are distinct from classic detective stories, but what is their effect? Still, the world is mystified. The presence of violence and shoddy rackets provide topicality, but in turn they are explained and removed by a directness as lacking in socialycomplexity as any detective story exhibits. The very excessiveness of the scenes of resolution - the famous shooting of Charlotte in the belly as she stands naked before Mike - induce a sense of finality that obscures doubt. The world may harbor bad people, but surely it would not, if they were all dealt with in Mike's way.

Hammer is not a member of a group intrinsically elite. He is neither a gentleman nor refined in intelligence, but he nonetheless is a superior individual within his melieu, for he alone has the clear will to act. As for the melieu itself, it only appears to be realistic, in the sense on being a counterpart of the actual historical realm of readers. When Spillane writes he creates an environment as distanced and sealed off as any writer does. Though he does not obtrude himself into the narrative to achieve this and dispenses with a fictional recorder, his hand is evident in the magical behavior of Hammer. In other words, every reader knows Hammer's life is just as much as Gillingham's, Marlowe's, or Wolfe's a fantasy. In this case it is just that the fantasy is for those unbothered if they have authoritarian daydreams.

Though Spillane's ideology is never far from the surface of his story and is usually presented directly through Mike Hammer's speeches on law and order,

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one cannot attribute the ideology's impact solely to the author. What he has done is to exploit the possibilities that inhere in the form of detective stories in the first place. The literary necessities of closure, criminality, individualistic detective, and a distanced world exist already for him to develop in his peculiar light. The tolerable violence of his subject matter does not do violence to the literature.

It is not my intention to explain away differences among detective stories. Instead it is to point out that the differences occur largely in the authors' choice of melieu and stress in characterization. The social world of Hard-Boiled detective fiction has been fragmented and, therefore, somewhat greater weight lies upon the detective as he proceeds to reconstitute the order disrupted by crime, but reconstitute it he does, because that is his function whether in mean streets or the houses of the country gentry. Because of these generic demands the conservative minded author has an easier time of it. Critics of the social order may achieve a populist outlook (see the Continental Op in The Red Harvest[5]) or produce satire as do G.D.H. and Margaret Cole or Raymond Chandler, but where is the radical or revolutionary Marxist's detective story?

In sum, the terms Hard-Boiled and Golden Age are examples of synecdoche, a part of the detective narrative, subject to alteration, provides a classification of the whole. Synecdoche has some value in criticism, but it cannot overshadow the full dialectic at work in detective fiction. Dispositions of individual authors and their perception of social environment affect the image of melieu and modify characterization. The framework, however, is a genre historical in origin but now autonomous to the point that it can be bent and adapted but not fundamentally altered unless the author ceases to write detective stories all together.

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Footnotes

1 See the introduction to Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror (London:Gollancz,1928).

2 "The Simple Art of Murder," The Atlantic Monthly (Dec. 1944). Reprinted in The Second Chandler Omnibus (London:Hamish Hamilton,1962), pp. 3-15.

3 See, for example, Another's Crime, From the Diary of Inspector Byrnes (NY:Cassell, 1888). Among Pinkerton's many volumes Criminal Reminiscences and Detective Sketches (NY:Carleton,1879) is a convenient illustration.

4 The most influential essay in my consideration of literary imperatives is by John G. Cawelti, "Myth, Symbol, and Formula," Journal of Popular Culture 8 (Summer 1974), 1-9.

5 For development of this point see John M. Reilly, "The Politics of Tough Guy Mysteries," The University of Dayton Review 10 (Summer 1973), 25-31.